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SUBJECT: SENIOR SHIA CLERIC CALLS FOR FOCUS ON SECURITY

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert S. Ford
for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Parliamentarian and senior SCIRI cleric Sheikh Jalal al-Din al-Sagheer told PolOff May 22 that the new government's top priority should be improving security for the country. Al-Sagheer warned that the Najaf clerical establishment (marja'iyah) is rapidly losing patience and might begin to openly blame the U.S. for the worsening security situation. On a positive note, Al-Sagheer assessed the new government of Iraq to be a vast improvement over Ja'afari's, claiming that Prime Minister Maliki at least is willing to listen to advice. Sagheer rejected both Tawfiq al-Yasiri and Hajim al-Hassani for Interior and Defense Ministries respectively. As one of the more influential Shia clerics in SCIRI, al-Sagheer's comments are indicative of the tough fight Maliki still has in front of him to finalize his cabinet. End Summary.

Security is Paramount

¶2. (C) In a meeting on May 22 with PolOff, senior SCIRI member Sheikh Jalal al-Din al-Sagheer stated that the new government's top priority should be a plan on improving security for the country. Al-Sagheer noted that the marja'iyah's language on the importance of security - particularly that of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and Ayatollah Muhammad Said al-Hakim - was becoming tougher. Soon, he warned, Najaf would begin to openly criticize the United States for its failure to protect Iraqi citizens.

¶3. (C) PolOff responded that ensuring security for Iraq is a top priority for the Iraqi Government and for the USG. Al-Sagheer sighed that this is what the Americans had said during the failed Tal'AFar effort. The streets of Tal'AFar are again unsafe, al-Sagheer claimed. "You need to be serious," he chided.

Al-Maliki's Not Bad, but Need Rest of Government

¶4. (C) Al-Sagheer assessed the new government of Iraq to be a vast improvement over Ja'afari's, claiming that Maliki at least is willing to listen to advice. "We finally got rid of that 'Teacher' who couldn't handle his real job," gloated al-Sagheer. He remarked that the Embassy should not be worried about the "staged walkout" of some of the Sunni Arabs members. They will be back within weeks, al-Sagheer predicted.

¶5. (C) As for the Interior and Defense candidates, al-Sagheer acknowledged that Tawfiq al-Yasiri and Hajim al-Hassani are the frontrunner candidates, and blamed the U.S. for not intervening to block them. According to al-Sagheer, al-Yasiri is not active or competent enough to handle the difficult Interior portfolio. SCIRI's choice for the position is Qassim Daoud, whom al-Sagheer characterized as a moderate, independent choice. When it came to al-Hassani, al-Sagheer very animatedly told PolOff that if al-Hassani is nominated for Defense, the Shia Alliance would renominate Bayan Jabr for Interior. When PolOff questioned how the Shia would retract Jabr from Finance after he was just sworn in as Minister, al-Sagheer waved aside the question as "mere protocol." Neither al-Yasiri nor al-Hassani would do anything to improve the security situation in Iraq, al-Sagheer claimed.

Comment

¶6. (C) Al-Sagheer is one of the most influential Shia clerics in Baghdad. The imam of the Baratha Mosque, he narrowly escaped injury in the April 7 bomb attack on the mosque shortly after Friday prayers. Much of his complaining about American security policies is standard fare from the imam; he would be a hard man to satisfy. Al-Sagheer's opinion about the Interior and Defense ministries, meanwhile, foreshadows the difficulties that still lay ahead for Prime Minister al-Maliki as he tries to finalize his cabinet. While al-Sagheer briefly mentioned al-Hassani, the conversation largely centered around the Ministry of Interior and Daoud's candidacy. Daoud classifies

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himself as a moderate independent, but he has chosen to ally himself - however loosely - with SCIRI. Daoud's close friendship and political support of SCIRI's Adil Abd al-Mahdi for Prime Minister has caused many political blocs to question Daoud's independence. Beyond his health problems, it is precisely the support of men like Abd al-Mahdi and Shaykh Jalal ad-Din al-Sagheer that make many outside the Shia Coalition uncomfortable with Daoud as Interior Minister.
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